

1891

Florence. 22nd August 1893.

22 Aug

My dear Richard,

From all I know of you I should have said you would be the last to write to me on "visions and affairs of state"; yet you have turned out to be the first. Pray be careful. Since some late events every one is cat-watched. Banishment would be a nuisance, as I like the country. The being tongue tied on certain matters, as we are at present, is no nuisance to me, as my mind seldom wanders on those things which I can neither further nor retard. You not only gave the most imprudent news, but wrote it on the direction side of the letter, so that, by mere peeping in, it could be read. The consequence was, they supposing there must be more of the same stuff in it, your letter was detained from my hands for a week, and afterwards delivered to me cut with a knife in such a way that they could, without breaking the wafers, read every sentence. You will be ten times more displeased at this circumstance than I am, - so I shan't say another word about it. It is unpleasant to learn that you and your family have been in crazy health, - but you were tolerably recovered, and Mrs R better than she was a twelvemonth ago, and my godson walks about. Give my love to them, every man Jack and every woman Gill. I will write to Davenport as you request, very soon, for I have just received a letter from him. Severn has read your straggling lines, which don't hold so much as one is apt to imagine at first sight, - the words look frightened at one another, - however you pen away pretty well. He, (Severn), and I have been together for these two months. We are now on the wing for Venice. He desires to be remembered, but I forget in what words, - and he is not at hand to repeat them, being occupied in a sketch from Raphael in the Grand Duke's palace. Every body, English and Italian, hold him in high esteem, both as a man and an artist. I am daily expecting to see Hunt & family here. The heat is so excessive, it is probable their journey may be delayed beyond the time of my departure, which is fixed for the day after to-morrow; however as I shall return by Florence in my road to Rome, I shall then see him assuredly. Severn wishes for a month at Venice, so it will be for a month. Just as I had finished the last sentence, in came an old gentleman to take formal leave of me, kissing me on both cheeks, and wishing me all sorts of good. My progress in kissing formed an appropriate subject for Mr Dilke; - the first time a young fellow ran up to me in the street and gave me a kiss. I was taken by storm and quite confounded, - now it is a matter of course. Only imagine me, on my return to England, giving you a kiss! - may a couple, to make his balance true!" Give Mr Vincent a shake of the hand for my sake, not wishing to trouble you to play at slapper-chaps with him. I hope he will enjoy a pleasant tour in the north, but the accounts I hear of your summer are abominable, - it pleases me to be away. Many thanks for your literary news. In return I'll give you an account of Milton's Vallombrosa, together with the whole of a tour I have lately made. It shall be drawn from some notes I took during the time, and the exactness of time and distances, with many other petty matters shall all be included, as these things (as Dr Fox well knew) make trivial adventures of great moment. So, after mending my nib, here goes. On Monday 11th inst., at 2 o'clock AM, we set off from Florence in a hired carriage. The ~~we~~ consisted of a Mr. H. M. F., a Miss F., Severn, myself, and a man servant. Oh! I forgot the driver and the horses! Saw the dawn break upon some agreeable landscapes to the right and left. At 4 crossed the Arno to the south side, at the

town of Ponte a Sieve; where, at this early hour, all was life and bustle, especially at the Market-place, as a "festa" was to be held there that day. You must spread out a map before you, or it will be impossible for you too understand me. After 14 miles arrived at Pelago, a village, whence we were compelled to leave the carriage, and proceed up the hill, by a winding bad road, as we could. The ladies hired horses; but as there were no such things as side-saddles, and as they would not consent to ride like "men of wax," there were a thousand complaints and trepidations amidst a fund of merriment on all sides. On we went, the gentlemen on foot, ready to catch a lady if she was inclined to make a slip. At last they gobbled on with more courage. I began a ballad on the occasion, then Mr. J. added a stanza, then Miss J. another, all uncommonly witty at the time, but ^{from} being capable of staring on paper, I question if they could bear repeating. This up-hill work lasted 6 miles, - the sun rather burning, tho' the road was sometimes shaded, - and at 1/2 past nine we arrived at the Convent; for Vallombrosa has been peopled by Monks ever since the 8th ^{only excepting the time of the revolution} century. The mountains on every side were finely wooded, tho' not so luxuriantly as in times past, - folks say the French cut down a great deal of timber here. I found fault with the fir-trees for giving too much formality to nature, - yet I and the whole group were delighted, and the pure elastic mountain air gave us new & spirits and vigour. Ladies not being permitted to advance their feminilities beyond the chaste threshold of the convent, our party was shown into a building near at hand for the accommodation of such mixed visitors. At midday we were served with dinner, and, sooth to say, with not one of the best of all possible dinners, - yet the wine, both red & white, was excellent. Formerly the monks used to treat all comers gratis; now their means, since their restoration a few years back, are more straightened, and they expect a handsome douceur at parting, which must yield them, from their many visitors, pretty pickings. The English, more frequently than others, go there, and are not only well received as good pay-masters, but as serving to colour the monotony of their lives, with news and compliments, - besides they give them opportunities of saying civil things in return, and of conversing with petticoat-^{wearers} ~~contacts~~, - all very pleasant no doubt, - egad! one of the monks looked and talked somewhat delightfully (to say no worse) with Miss J. the men, the contraband sex being left behind, explored the convent. Neither inside nor outside is there any beauty of architecture, nor has it the charm of antiquity. The Church, tho' small, was striking; but it could boast of no fine paintings, - so much the better, for those they have are injured by damp, as during the winter they live, as it were, in the clouds. The monks shave their chins, and wear black; their number is 20, - one half lay brothers. After dinner we toiled up to their Paradiso (little Paradise), a chapel on a high rock, commanding a most extensive view, but none of the best considering its heavenly name, - Florence looked beautiful in the map, for it was very like a map. At 1/2 past 2 we left Vallombrosa, the ladies hoosed as before, and the rest on foot. We had another 5 or perhaps 6 miles of the worst kind of hilly roads, with little to repay us in the views. At last we got to the high road, at a place called Consuma, whither the carriage had been driven round to meet us. Then 12 miles more of easy riding brought us to the town of Prato Vecchio. Lack-a-day! I omitted to mention that Severn left us at

Vallombrosa, as he had seen the Convent of the Camaldoli in his way from Rome, and as he candidly determined not to lose more than one day from his canvas, so back he went to Florence, where he arrived on foot at midnight. At Prato Vecchio, after some woful fears to the contrary, we got well housed in its only inn, and ate good beef-steaks for supper. On Tuesday at noon (for we all wanted a long sleep) away we went by another mountain track for the Camaldoli, the Ladies always horrid, except now and then, when they left their nags in disdain and trudged with us on foot. This was for 6 miles more of rough work, - yet the scenery repaid us amply for the toil, and the sun, owing to a thin veil he wore, was not too fierce. It was a wondrous up-hill business for the greater part; then, on our left, was a grand hollow, cut into a hundred deep ravines; on the opposite side appeared Monte Falterone, an important Signor, whence the Arno takes its source; then, presently, on our right, was another deep, with a village near the bottom. Few of the inhabitants of this village remain during the winter, as the snow keeps them prisoners, - they were all comfortably clothed and well fed, as are all the Tuscan peasantry. We had to trot down to the village, & then up again, and then down, gradually down for a mile, to the convent. This last mile was like enchantment. I never beheld any thing of the kind in my life. The Highlands beat it, out and out, in wildness, romance, and terror, but I never, in my most fanciful moods, could picture to myself such a scene of beauty. What foliage! what richness of colouring! what never ending, still beginning woods, on gentle slopes and rocky steep! - how admirably were the trees contrasted! how they waved, whole mountains of them, in the free air! Here the firs mixed with the chestnut, the elm, the oak, and fifty others, as if nature's hand had planted them, - and so perhaps it was. The convent itself has little more to boast of, in appearance, than that at Vallombrosa. The Monks wear white dresses and beards: they shave the head and the upper lip. Their number is 40, one half lay-brothers, before the revolution their family consisted of 90. Their best books were taken by the French. An English party (whose invitation to their room was not accepted, as we could not, ^{according to} ~~like~~ our nation's silly caution, know who they might be) were before us; and so, in our pride, we dined in a carpenter's shop. Marry on us! what a dinner! what delicate cookery! The very sight, not to say the taste, of any one of the dishes, would make a man an epicure for life. O, the jolly rogues! "And do you always live so, my good Fathers?" quoth I. "God forbid!" replied one, "if it were a fast day, we could not give you meat!" How fat the rogues were! - and how they smirked and smiled at the women! Soon as dinner was over we climbed a steep hill above the convent to see the Hermitage. It was two miles to the top, and the air there was very cold. Never was so lovely a walk. This Hermitage is now untenanted, so the Ladies were admitted. It is a wall-enclosure, containing a Church and I know not how many houses (separate) for the hermits, - each house has a small oratory, a parlour, a study, a kitchen, and a garden, - no bad mode of living, putting solitude and the religion out of reckoning, - they are left in statue grove, just as when the establishment was suppressed, the walls decorated with triumphal prints of holy tales, but the gardens ^(also the) are overgrown with weeds. The descent to the convent made our knee joints ache. The Ladies were lodged for the night out of the holy pale. F. and I supped and slept in the Convent. While talking about eye-sight in the Refectory, I boasted I could write the Peter Roster on a bit of paper the size of my little finger-nail, - Lord! what a posse of Monks I had about me, pretending incredulity, in order to provoke me to make them such a present. They promised the finest paper, - crown-quills, - every thing I could want; and I had scarcely risen from a good bed, when pop came one with all the apparatus. I wrote three for them, - and then I was to settle for which particular fathers they were made, or a sad period I should have left behind me, - at least it appeared so to me. They were as fond of them as any children of their toys. The Wednesday morning was passed loungingly, enjoying the beauties of the Valley, and Mrs F., the only busy one, took a pretty view of one of the prettiest spots. Again we partook of their

excellent dinner-cher, and could not quit the place till 5 o'Clock, when we returned to Prato Vecchio as we came, and then rode, the following day, (30 miles) to Florence. It was a happy jolly jaunt; and I have given you, deny it who dare, a full, true, and particular account; - indeed so long a one, that I cannot bear the thought of rewriting it, and therefore you will oblige me by letting Dilke read it; for I recollect his saying "Of course, Brown, you will make a point of visiting Vallombrosa", and that implied a demand for my opinion of the said visit. I know it will in some measure satisfy his curiosity; and, if you are a good fellow, you won't grumble at my request. On the second day after our return to this City of flowers, away went H., Severn, & I to Pisa. The old fresco paintings there, in the Campo Santo, disappointed Severn, but I was by no means disappointed in the sight of my dear Carlino. He visited me in

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Thomas Richards Esq.

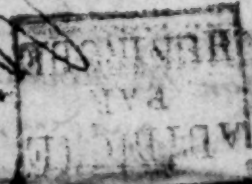
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Florence on St John's day, and staid a week. Whether this my farewell visit till next Spring made me regard him with more than usual partiality, or whether he really merits the opinion, I know not; - but, for the first time, I made up my mind he was a clever good tempered boy. It is strange he and I should talk Italian together! Next year, however, he will live at my knee, and then for our English. I taught him a little English in the three days I was with him, - a child picks up a language as fast as Pidgeons do peas. He grows tall, not thin but rather spare, keeps up his rosy cheeks in this hot weather, and calls for his ice after dinner quite as a matter of course. It will be a painful affair to take him away from my Pisan Padrona, - when I said my next visit would be to place him in my own house, where I knew not, the old woman burst into tears. I never will ask you again to be a good correspondent.

Yours most sincerely, Chas. Brown.



My dear Mr. [illegible]
I have just received your letter of the 14th inst. and am
glad to hear that you are well. I am
at present in the city of [illegible] and
am very busy with my work. I will
write you again in a few days.

Yours very truly,
[illegible signature]
[illegible name]
[illegible address]